

Nehemiah Part 12: Listening to the King

I. Two Parts to Nehemiah

A. Nehemiah 1-6: Removing the Reproach

Nehemiah 1-6 is the story of Rebuilding the Wall of Jerusalem and Removing the Reproach on God's people..

B. Nehemiah 7-13: Restoring Covenant Faithfulness

The second half of the book is about "*Restoring Faithfulness*".

1. Renewing the Covenant: chaps. 8-10

In chapters 8 through 10 they renew their covenant with God.

2. Living Out the Covenant: chaps. 11-13

In Chapters 11-13 Begin the journey of living out that covenant.

Chapters 12 is another strange passage. And if it isn't just a history lesson but God's inspired word given to instruct us; we shall have to pay careful attention to what the text itself tells us is important about these events.

II. What's It All About?

Chapter 12 records three relatively minor events in the history of Israel.

1. It starts with the record of the generations of the priestly line.
2. Then it describes the dedication of the wall.
3. Finally it records the appointment of Levites to manage the storerooms in the temple, to sing in worship, and to guard the gates.

Most commentaries focus on the dedication of the wall and use it as an example of dedicating our lives and our work to God. They do this because it hard to find meaning in lists of names or the appointment of priests to their duties in the Temple. The significance of these things is not obvious at first glance. But the text suggests something about what the Holy Spirit thought was significant. We should always pay attention to repeated phrases!

A. The Records of the Priests. vs. 1-26

The first 26 verses list the records of the names of the priests and Levites.

1. **1st Generation:** Verses 1-9 list the family heads of the first generation of priests who returned from exile with Zerubbabel 95 years earlier. Jeshua was the high priest.
2. **Succession of High Priests:** Verses 10-11 gives us the line of succession of the high priests from Jeshua.

3. **2nd Generation:** Verses 12-21 list the heads of the priestly families in the second generation of returnees under the high priest Joiakim
4. **3rd Generation:** Verses 22-26 lists the places to find the records of the third and following generation of priests. These are the priests who served under Ezra and Nehemiah. The high priest at this time was Eliashib.

This list feels distant and irrelevant to us. But I would like you to note a small phrase that may at first slip past our attention at the end of verse 24.

And the leaders of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah, Jeshua son of Kadmiel, and their associates, who stood opposite them to give praise and thanksgiving, one section responding to the other, as prescribed by David the man of God. Nehemiah 12:24

The fact that they were doing things the way David prescribed doesn't exactly make us jump up and down with excitement and fresh understanding, but let's put that in our mental pocket for the moment and carry on.

B. The Dedication of the Wall vs. 27-43

The next part records of the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem. The music team of Levite priests is brought to Jerusalem for the event along with their musical instruments. The priests and Levites first purify themselves ceremonially, then the people, then the city gates and the wall. After that Nehemiah records a wonderful celebration of thanksgiving with 2 choirs.

They start at the gate farthest away from the Temple. One choir marches around the wall to the left and one goes to the right. They sing to each other as they march around the city on top of the same wall that their enemies said "*if even a fox jumped on it, it would fall down*". When the two choirs reach the Temple they leave the wall and entered the Temple courts where they offered sacrifices. And all the people, including the women and children, shouted with joy. They shouted so much that the sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away. It is a picture of the joyful restoration God had promised his people.

But what is the significance of these events? There is no record of the glory of the Lord coming down among them like it did when Solomon's temple was dedicated. We may be tempted to come up with our own lessons like one I read which pointed out that purification came before worship and so God wants us to worship him with pure hearts. Well, that is certainly true. But is that why the Spirit of God inspired Nehemiah to record it? Does the Holy Spirit give us any hints as to what was significant about this? At the end of verse 36 there is another small phrase that may help us. It says:

Hoshaiah and half the leaders of Judah followed them, ³³ along with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, ³⁴ Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, ³⁵ as well as some priests with trumpets, and also Zechariah son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah,

the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph,³⁶ and his associates—Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani—with musical instruments prescribed by David the man of God. Ezra the scribe led the procession. Nehemiah 12:32-36

The same phrase we saw earlier in the chapter about leaders of the Levites who led the people in praise and thanksgiving is used to describe the musical instruments that were played by the Thanksgiving choirs marching around the walls. There seems to be something important about doing things the way David prescribed. Let's add that to your mental pocket as well.

C. The Appointment of Gatekeepers and Singers: vs. 44-47

The final section of the chapter records the appointment of Levite priests to some of their duties.

1. First, some were appointed to manage the storerooms of the temple where the tithes and offering were stored and distributed to the priests.
2. Second, we are told that the people of Judah were pleased with the priests who led in the service of God, the service of purification, in singing, and in guarding the gates of the city and the temple.

Then we come to another little phrase about how they did this work.

They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the singers and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon."
Nehemiah 12:45

There it is again. They did their work the way it had been commanded by David and Solomon. And the Spirit of God seems to think it's important for us to know that. The chapter then concludes with a summary statement of what was going on and compares the days of David with the days of Nehemiah.

⁴⁶ For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. ⁴⁷ So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron. Neh. 12:46-48

Hey, they were sincere in their love for God. Did it really matter who sang the songs, or what instruments they used, or who managed the storerooms of the Temple and guarded the gates? Why all these references to doing things the way David said? Why do things the way he prescribed? This only makes sense if you have paid attention to what came before in Scripture. Once again, the importance of *Chronicles* in understanding *Nehemiah* becomes vital.

III. David's Way:

We have spent a fair amount of time looking at the book of *Chronicles* alongside our study of *Nehemiah*. In fact, it would be accurate to call *Nehemiah* – *III Chronicles*! It is carrying on the story and themes of *Chronicles*. The narrative part of *Chronicles* begins with a Preface and a Post-script. The preface is the death of Saul because he was unfaithful to the Lord. The postscript is that the people of Judah eventually went into captivity in Babylon because of their unfaithfulness. Having told us what went wrong before David and after David, the book then focuses on what went right during David and Solomon's reigns.

A. David Learns to Listen: I Chronicle 13-15

Chronicles focuses us on a major turning point in David's reign. His well intentioned attempt to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem ends in disaster as Uzzah is struck dead by God for touching the ark. This event of sincere spiritual dedication and celebration was instantly turned into somberness and shock. David was both mad at and afraid of God. So they left the ark at the home of the nearest Levite priest and went home. Apparently, sincerity and good intentions alone are not what God is looking for.

In the next chapter, the focus seems to shift to David's battles with the Philistines. But God is still addressing the same issue. David twice defeats the same armies that had recently killed Saul. But instead of inquiring of a witch like Saul, he inquires of God what to do. And David does exactly what the Lord commanded and defeats the Philistines. And then David realizes they had missed that step in bringing the ark to Jerusalem. They had done it their own way instead of God's. He says to the Levites.

"It was because you, the Levites, did not bring it up the first time that the LORD our God broke out in anger against us. We did not inquire of him about how to do it in the prescribed way." I Chronicles 15:13

David has learned that religious fervor is not enough. Sincerity is not enough. When God says something, He does so for a reason and we need to pay attention. The consequences for Uzzah of not doing things God's way, may seem severe to us. But *Chronicles* shows how the people repeatedly ignored what God said. They got more and more off track until the nation was conquered, thousands died, and the rest went into captivity. God gives us commands because He loves us and He knows the destruction these things will bring in our lives.

Application:

God warns us against loving money because He knows the destruction that loving money brings. Greed is a terrible master that rules and destroys many people. Many of you know the fear of a workplace driven by greed. Many of you know the emptiness of a home dominated by greed. God speaks to us about these things not just because they lead to evil, but because He loves us and it is wisdom!

B. David's Instructions for the Levites:

The last 8 chapters of *1 Chronicles* is about how David prepared for the construction of a Temple for God. In 1 Chronicles 23 David says, when the temple gets built, the Levites will no longer need to carry the tabernacle around. So the next four chapters list the new duties they were assigned by God through David. These duties included singers, musicians, gatekeepers, those who managed the treasuries of the Temple and those who assisted the priests in the services of the Temple like purifications, managing the storerooms and standing to give thanks and praise every morning and every evening. And 1 Chronicles 28:12-13 tells us that it was God who gave David both the plans for the Temple and the instructions for the duties of the priests and Levites.

C. The Significance of Nehemiah 12:

1. Doing It God's Way:

What the Spirit of God is telling us is significant in Nehemiah 12 is not that they dedicated the wall and it was a great party and you will be joyful to if you dedicate your life to God. What gets repeatedly noted is that they were doing these things the way it had been prescribed by David, who was instructed by God. They were doing things God's way, not their own way. They were paying attention to what God said and they were doing it. They were living out what they had promised to do in the renewal of the covenant in Nehemiah 10.

And the Holy Spirit seems to be emphasizing that they were even doing it in the small things.

- The Levites who stood opposite one another morning and evening to give antiphonal praise and thanks to God was just the way David said to do it.
- The musical instruments used for the dedication were the ones prescribed by David. Those particular instruments weren't holier than others. It was that they were paying attention to God's word and doing things His way.
- And they had assigned Levites to oversee the storerooms and administer the offering to sustain the priests in the service and worship of the temple.

2. Excuses:

Our tendency when the Holy Spirit illuminates God's Word or speaks directly into our lives maybe to say, *"It's no big deal."* *"I don't see why that is important."* Or *"I just want to cheat a little bit on my taxes."* *"I just want to have a little fun."* We always seem to have some justification for our choices. But it is only ourselves we deceive with such excuses. And faithfulness in the small things is still an indication of our faithfulness in much. And chapter 13 adds something more to this equation we should catch as well.

IV. Broken Promises: Nehemiah 13

A. A Detail Observed: vs. 1-3

Nehemiah 13 begins with the phrase *“On that day.”* It is not clear which day it is actually referring to. The critical point here is not then *“WHEN they read it”*, but the *“WHAT they read.”* They had read that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted to the assembly of God because of what they had done to the Israelites at the end of the forty years in the wilderness.

Before the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, they had sought to pass through the lands of Ammon and Moab on the eastern side of the Jordan River. But these people would not give them food or water. And they hired Balaam the sorcerer to call down a curse upon Israel. That doesn't mean he was hired to swear at them, but to pronounce curses which had real power to harm and affect the lives of people. Something that we in the West have little understanding or experience of. So, the Ammonites and Moabites were banned from the Assembly of the Lord.

Let's just acknowledge the mystery of God holding subsequent generations some responsibility for the actions of their ancestors. Things like this humble me and remind me that God is beyond my ability to explain or even understand. I for one choose to leave that in God's hands. The presence of these people in the Temple is another of those apparently small things God wanted His people to pay attention to. Why was this important? Watch what comes next!

B. A Room of Compromise: vs. 4-5

In verse 4, we are told that Eliashib had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of God. This is the name of the then current high priest, but this may just be someone with the same name. The storerooms were to be overseen by the Levitical priests so that contributions could be gathered and stored in the temple to support all the priests as required by the Law.

But we are told Eliashib *“was also closely associated with Tobiah”*. vs.4 Remember Tobiah from chapters 1-6? What was he called? *“Tobiah the Ammonite official”*. (2:19) We were also told that many in Judah were under oath to him. (Neh.6) And in direct disobedience to God's word and the renewed covenant, Eliashib gave Tobiah *the Ammonite* a storeroom to use in the Temple. Now, where was Nehemiah? Verse 6 says;

“But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Sometime later I asked his permission⁷ and came back to Jerusalem.”

The misuse of a storeroom in the Temple was a small thing. But it was a sign that they were starting to ignore God's Word and no longer *“doing things according to the commands of David.”* Eliashib either felt that he knew better than God how to use the storerooms or was simply acting in his own interests instead of as a servant of God. This is a reminder that when it

comes to selecting leaders in the church, we cannot simply assume that because they are members in good standing that they are qualified to lead. A person's understanding of the MB Confession of Faith should be discussed not assumed. And the fruit of a growing relationship with God described of leaders in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1 should be asked about in an open way, keeping in mind that none of us have attained perfection.

Nehemiah took this as a serious breach of the covenant they had made with God. He threw Tobiah's stuff out of the room and ordered the priests to cleanse it and put back the equipment of the house of God, the grain offerings, and the incense. But I wonder how much Eliashib's actions were affecting other people. I wonder how many people thought *"Well, he's a priest. And if he doesn't have to obey what God says, why do I?"* The choices we make affect others. By what we choose to do, we either encourage or discourage others in their walk with God, and in our corporate witness to the world. For example, I wonder how many people will settle for the ease of an "online faith" after COVID. Directly engaging with one another, encouraging one another, listening to one another, serving one another, loving the sometimes unlovely is so messy, and time consuming, and inconvenient, and Christ-like!

C. Neglecting the House of God:

So after Eliashib's rebuke, we should not be surprised when the next thing we see is that the Levites who had been singing and serving in the Temple were not receiving their assigned portions anymore. People had stopped giving. So the Levites had left the service of the Temple in Jerusalem and returned to their villages to try and make a living. Nehemiah rebukes the officials, who signed the covenant in chapter 10, with the final words of their promise asking them;

"Why is the house of God neglected?" Neh.13:11

Neglect of the temple was always THE key sign in the book of *Chronicles* that their hearts were turning away from God. Nehemiah reassigns the priests and Levites to their posts. Then he takes an offering to provide for them. And he appoints trustworthy priests to be in charge of distributing it to their brothers.

D. Desecrating the Sabbath:

But the pattern of compromise did not end there. Nehemiah sees men treading winepresses, loading up donkeys, and selling goods on the Sabbath. Remember, this was one of the "small things" that they had made the binding agreement to obey God in. Nehemiah again rebukes them in verse 18.

Now, I do not believe the Sabbath is required of us as New Testament believers. According to *Hebrews 4* it was a sign pointing to the salvation work of Christ whereby we rest from our works and trust in His. But it is still a wise spiritual rhythm. It reminds us that our value is not in what we do and that taking time to rest and seek the Living God is vital to the health of our

bodies, our spirits, and our relationships with God and with others. For the Jews however, a hint of how important God saw the Sabbath is that the length of the period of exile in Babylon was tied to the land receiving the Sabbath rests that had been ignored by previous generations.(2 Chron. 36:21) Maybe we should add that one to our list of the mysteries of God.

Nehemiah orders the gates of Jerusalem closed before the Sabbath began at sunset and places guards there to make sure the merchants didn't creep into the city at night, or try to enter the city at dawn. And then he ordered the Levite gatekeepers to purify themselves and guard the gates on the Sabbath. Please remember that the appointment of gatekeepers was one of the duties that had been assigned to the Levites in chapter 12 *"according to the commands of David"*.

E. Marrying Unbelievers:

The close of Nehemiah is a confrontation with a fourth area of sin - intermarriage with the godless nations around them. He discovers that they are marrying women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. This is not an issue of racial bias. It is an issue of spiritual faithfulness. It is another of the "small things" which were part of the binding oath in chapter 10.

Nehemiah rebukes and punishes some of these men. He requires them to take an oath not to give their sons and daughters in marriage to these foreigners and then he gives his reason why.

"Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women." Neh. 13:26

The New Testament warns us against being yoked together with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14) and one obvious application of that is marriage. The temptation to marry someone who does not know or follow God is real. We can easily be attracted to and fall in love with someone who does not have faith in Christ.

And Nehemiah's reference to Solomon is an appropriate warning to all Christians who have not drawn a line in the sand on this issue. His point is that if there was ever somebody committed to God, loved by God, given wisdom by God, and protected by God it was Solomon. But even he could not resist the pressure of pleasing his godless spouses. And frequently, the core issues of conflicting values do not reach a head until well after marriage. It particularly becomes an issue in the raising of children. What will you teach them about sexual purity? What will you allow them to watch on TV? How will you teach them about God? How important is it to be truthful?

Nehemiah's Three Prayers:

After Nehemiah confronted these last 3 areas of compromise, he prays a prayer. It is a prayer that God would remember what he has done. We haven't seen this before. His tone has changed. It sounds like a prayer for God to remember him favorably because nobody else will. I

suspect that nobody was cheering Nehemiah's reforms now. He was popular when things were really hard and people knew they needed God. But now, 20 or so years later, with the wall rebuilt and some prosperity and security returning, people weren't as happy to have their actions challenged.

V. Putting It Into Practice:

Nehemiah does not end with an *"And they all lived happily ever after."* Chapters 12 & 13 teach us several things.

1. God's Word Is Our Guide.

So. . . Pay Attention! This is overstating the obvious but we need to devote ourselves to listening to what God says and do it!

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does." James 1:22-25

2. Compromise Always Begins Small.

When Jesus said, *"He who is faithful in small thing, will also be faithful in much"*, he knew what he was talking about. What is the storeroom of your life that Satan is tempting you to hand over control of? What is the small area he is tempting you, pressuring you, mocking you to give in on? He never asks for the whole Temple at first. He just wants a small room in the corner, from which to sabotage God's purposes in your life. That room may be the place you manage your finances, or your sexuality, or your thought life, or your entertainment. Don't try to guard it on your own. Keep crying out to God to keep you faithful.

3. Endurance Is Essential.

Following Christ is more than just being faithful in the little things. It is being faithful in the little things for a lifetime! It is many small choices, that add up to a direction over time. Endurance in this journey is required! Many declare their obedience to God when things are hard and they know they need help. But God is calling us to run with endurance this race before us and in this too we need the power of the Holy Spirit. *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."* 2 Tim. 4:7

4. Popularity Isn't the Point.

Finally, obeying God can be popular at one time and not at another. People thanked Nehemiah when he led in the tough times. But it looks like only God seemed to care in the latter days of his service. Popularity isn't the point. Getting people to praise us is not the point. I have to remind myself of that frequently. It is the praise of God that I need to seek.